

Expressions of hatred and xenophobia toward immigrants, at an all time high, are producing widespread fear in the Latino community. Unfortunately, the echo of a hate-filled climate is now making its way through Congress. Anti-immigrant forces in the House of Representatives are capitalizing on fears and stereotypes to push the SAVE Act, an enforcement bill that would throw more money at our broken immigration system instead of engaging in the hard work of meaningful reform.

The SAVE act, introduced by Congressmen Tom Tancredo and Heath Shuler, is touted by proponents as an “enforcement” bill, but it would in fact put us on a slow, painful path toward detention and deportation. The bill is championed by hard line groups who advocate a strategy called “deportation by attrition.” As it sounds, this philosophy espouses making the lives of immigrants and their families so difficult, that they simply give up and self-deport.

This approach is inhumane and unworkable for a variety of reasons. First, the SAVE act would require local police to enforce immigration law, a policy which deters immigrants from reporting crimes and diverts police time away from serious threats to public safety. It would allocate millions of dollars for the construction of 8,000 additional detention beds for immigrants awaiting deportation.

Second, the legislation drastically expands an employer verification system that is wrought with errors – 17.8 million, according to the Social Security Administration itself. Forcing employers to verify eligibility status of their workers before this database is updated could jeopardize the jobs of millions of U.S. born and immigrant workers alike, whose information has been entered incorrectly in the system.

Enforcement of our nation’s borders is essential, as is holding employers accountable for hiring undocumented workers. However, if enacted without an earned legalization program for workers already here, these measures would seriously threaten the livelihoods of immigrants and their children around the country. What is more, the SAVE act does not realistically address our labor needs and makes no attempt to provide a legal workforce for employers who want to do the right thing.

In an election season where vulnerable politicians fear looking soft on immigration, the SAVE act already has a hefty 151 cosponsors. In the Latino community, we regret that politicians are attempting to score political points at the expense of immigrants who have only come here to work and create a better life for their families.

We can do better. At a time when all remaining Presidential candidates promote humane and effective approaches to fix our immigration system, it is time that Congress recognizes that scapegoating immigrants is not the right approach.

It plays to the fears of Americans, instead of our past as a nation of immigrants and our capacity to build strong communities together.

This country was built on the contributions of generations of immigrants. We should not allow Congress to turn our backs on this legacy and take us down a road that would create more fear in our communities and push immigrant families further into the shadows. Our leaders should pursue legislation that embodies our best values – reuniting families, strengthening the economy and restoring the rule of law.